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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAHRAN 000219

SIPDIS

PLEASE PASS TO NEA/ARP JEREMY BERNDT AND JOSHUA HARRIS

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SUBJECT: SHIA BUSINESS LEADERS MAKE A STRONG SHOWING IN AL-AHSA
CHAMBER OF COMMERCE ELECTIONS

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CLASSIFIED BY: Kevin Kreutner, Acting Consul General, EXEC, DOS.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)
SUMMARY

11. (SBU) In the July 25 al-Ahsa Chamber of Commerce elections, Shia candidates won five of the eight eligible board positions, with the remaining three going to Sunnis. In the previous elections in 2005, the ratio was the reverse in favor of Sunni candidates. One of the Shia victors attributed this shift to the increased organizational efforts among the Shia candidates and a procedural change in the voting regulations. He also attributed his desire and effort to run in the election to his participation in a USG-sponsored visitor program in 2007. END SUMMARY.

THE AL-AHSA OASIS

12. (SBU) Al-Ahsa is an oasis about 60 kilometers inland from the Persian Gulf with a population of approximately 1 million residents, 50% - 60% estimated to be Shia and the rest Sunni. The agricultural industry is the most important economic sector of al-Ahsa, as it has access to large underground water aquifers (which have incidentally been substantially depleted in recent decades).

AL-AHSA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

13. (SBU) The al-Ahsa Chamber of Commerce consists of twelve board members, eight of whom are elected. The other four members are appointed by the Ministry of Commerce. In the previous elections, which took place in 2005, five Sunni candidates and three Shia candidates were elected. The Ministry then appointed three Shia and one Sunni board member, resulting in a 50/50 split along sectarian lines. However, the chamber has not had a good reputation over the past four years as being

effective or addressing the needs of the business community. PolOff has heard these criticisms from both Shia and Sunni business people from al-Ahsa and other parts of the Eastern Province.

CHAMBER VOTING REGULATIONS BENEFIT SHIA

14. (C) Sadek al-Ramadan (strictly protect), a Shia business leader and political activist in al-Ahsa, won a seat in the al-Ahsa Chamber of Commerce elections on July 25. In an August 17 meeting, al-Ramadan told PolOff that the 2009 elections resulted in five Shia and three Sunni winners, a reversal of the previous election where Sunnis won five seats and Shia three. When asked what caused this shift, he noted that a change in voting regulations may have been partially responsible. In previous elections, registered members of the chamber voted eight times, one for each available seat. However, this led to candidates forming alliances of eight candidates who campaigned as a block. Generally, all eight members of the alliance would win all eight eligible seats, pushing out independent candidates.

15. (C) Al-Ramadan explained that this alliance would only allow two or three Shia candidates to campaign on their "ticket," thereby effectively limiting the number of Shia that could plausibly win. This year, however, the voting regulations were modified, and each registered member could only cast two at-large votes, which broke up the possibility of creating an alliance. This increased the chance for independent candidates to win a seat regardless of their affiliation with the alliance. (NOTE: The appointed board members have not yet been chosen by

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the ministry. END NOTE.)

SHIA BUSINESS LEADERS MOBILIZE

16. (C) Al-Ramadan explained that another reason for the Sunni-Shia shift in the election results was due to increased organization and voter mobilization efforts on the part of the Shia business leaders. The Shia business leaders aggressively lobbied the eligible Shia voters (registered members of the chamber), who, according to al-Ramadan, make up 38% of the total. They focused on getting people out to vote and approximately 1,200 people voted, twice the amount expected. Al-Ramadan attributes this large turnout and its disproportionately high ratio of Shia participants to be the other key factor in securing a substantial gain in elected Shia board members in the chamber.

17. (C) In September 2007, al-Ramadan participated in a PD-sponsored International Visitor program to the U.S. with several other Shia political activists from the Eastern Province. He told PolOff, "If I did not go to the U.S., I would not have run in the election." He realized after visiting U.S. civic leaders and institutions that his sect is not "empowered" in Saudi Arabia. "I did not know what empowered meant," al-Ramadan explained, "but now I know it's the most important thing for my community."

COMMENT

18. (C) The newly elected board members of the al-Ahsa Chamber of Commerce, like al-Ramadan, should bring new energy and ideas to a struggling business institution. Its reputation as an ineffective chamber of commerce is well known in the Eastern Province. The Mayor of al-Ahsa, Fahad bin Mohammed al-Jubair, has taken great strides in revitalizing the rundown infrastructure and buildings in al-Ahsa and is keen on invigorating the local economy. He would likely welcome and support a proactive and effective chamber. END COMMENT.
KREUTNER